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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000624

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: DOUGLAS DEVANANDA - GOVERNMENT'S MAN FOR THE NORTH?

REF: 2007 COLOMBO 728

Classified By: Acting DCM Michael DeTar, for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (S) SUMMARY: The leader of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), Douglas Devananda, has a long history of enmity with the recently defeated Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. He has been a favorite of successive Sri Lankan governments in Colombo. But Devananda has a violent and even criminal history, and shows few signs of reforming. While close ties continue between the top levels of the GSL and Devananda, we may be seeing an adjustment to that relationship as "Colonel Karuna" continues to strengthen his position with President Rajapaksa and his powerful brother, Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa, possibly at Devananda's expense. The GSL may attempt to install Devananda as the leader of a new provincial government in the North through early elections there, or as the head of an interim administration. This would help the government to maintain its iron grip on Jaffna and the North, but also might tend to pin down Devananda and his paramilitary forces, leaving Karuna a freer hand in the rest of Sri Lanka. The Rajapaksas may be trying to clear the way for Karuna and his paramilitary cadres to become the undisputed national force for unofficial internal control of the Tamil population. However, Devananda still enjoys a privileged position within the GSL, as evidenced by a meeting the Sri Lankan Ambassador to the U.S. insisted on arranging with Representative Heath Shuler during the latter's recent visit to Sri Lanka. Absent any indication that Devananda has sworn off his violent tactics, Embassy has privately pushed the Sri Lankan government not to install a Devananda-led regime in the north. In light of Devananda's lack of legitimate popular support, we remain concerned that local or provincial-level elections held hastily in the North could be manipulated to put Devananda and the EPDP into power at the expense of legitimate Tamil representatives, thereby undermining the post-conflict reconciliation process. End Summary.

TURNING POINT FOR GSL TAMIL ALLIES

¶2. (S) With the military campaign against the LTTE now over, senior leaders within the GSL are turning their attention to the post-conflict political landscape. The GSL is - as it

was in the East - anxious to confer a veneer of democratic legitimacy on its administration of the Northern Province by holding early elections there. While it plans to begin with elections to municipal councils in Vavuniya and Jaffna, it may soon move to hold an election for the Provincial Council as well - long before it completes the return of the war-displaced to their areas of origin. The GSL recognizes the need for Tamil leadership in the nearly 100% Tamil-inhabited north - but it will want to retain a high degree of control over any provincial government or interim administration it installs there. Post has previously reported (ref A) that the GSL is likely to place Douglas Devananda in some position of power in the North in order to accomplish this. Since Devananda has long been a rival to the LTTE, this could possibly help to further reduce the LTTE prospects for a resurgence in Jaffna and the Vanni. It would also give the GSL a loyal partner in controlling the economy and civil society there, through the EPDP's well-established paramilitary methods, including abductions, extrajudicial killings, and widespread extortion and protection rackets.

¶3. (S) Further, placing Devananda in power in the North might serve to preoccupy him with events and operations there, clearing the way for Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan, a/k/a "Colonel Karuna Amman" to further solidify his position country-wide. The Ministry of Defense, especially the President's powerful brother, Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, appears to strongly prefer former TMVP leader Karuna - now a member of the President's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) - as his go-to man for both Tamil politics and

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"unofficial" security operations. Embassy contacts report the Rajapaksa brothers have recently shown a clear preference for Karuna over Devananda. The President recently elevated Karuna to Minister for National Integration. However, Karuna has yet to develop popular backing in the North, since he is an Easterner, whose Tamil dialect and traditions are distinctly different from the Tamils of Jaffna and the Vanni.

DEVANANDA NOT LIKELY TO FADE AWAY

¶4. (C) Still, Devananda is not lacking in well-placed friends, and retains a fair amount of clout within the government. The EPDP's base in Colombo's many ethnic Tamil neighborhoods remains strong, and Devananda is unlikely to cede quietly the extortion revenue or the political influence he has developed in the capital. The recent visit of U.S. Congressman Heath Shuler to Sri Lanka provided an example. While visiting the large IDP camps in Vavuniya, Sri Lankan Ambassador to the U.S. Wickramasuriya pressed hard for a meeting with Devananda. Embassy had advised Representative Shuler to avoid such a meeting, but Wickramasuriya insisted it was important to meet with Devananda, given his position as Minister of Social Services - and his future role in any reconciliation process as one of the very few ethnic Tamil members of the Government. Wickramasuriya told the Congressman and his staff that he had personally arranged the meeting, and that to cancel it would be an embarrassment. The Congressman finally agreed to meet Devananda, on condition that it be brief, with no photographers present. Devananda spoke largely of the need to implement the 13th Amendment, which would devolve more power to the provincial level - an advantage for Devananda should he eventually become the leader of the North. A meeting for the Congressman with Karuna was originally scheduled for later that same day, but was dropped upon request from the Congressman - without any similar protest by Wickramasuriya.

DUBIOUS ELECTORAL SUPPORT

¶5. (C) Devananda has a long history of involvement in Tamil politics, and in making deals with successive Sri Lankan governments. A rival of the LTTE since the 1980s, he first struck a bargain with President Ranasinghe Premadasa, and was elected as an MP in 1994. Working with the Sri Lankan Navy,

his EPDP forces have long dominated several islands near Jaffna (Kayts, Delft, Punguduthivu), reportedly engaging in large-scale vote-tampering to win elections there. In 1998, the EPDP contested Local Authority elections in Jaffna and the neighboring islands, winning a suspiciously large majority of votes. In 1999, Devananda courted Chandrika Kumaratunga. During the Presidential election, he was able to bring in over 50,000 votes for her in Jaffna under questionable circumstances. (Note: in other regions, the entire Tamil community voted solidly for Kumaratunga's opponent.) During the 2000 Parliamentary elections there were widespread charges of election tampering. The EPDP reportedly obtained votes through cash bribes and offers of employment.

¶6. (S) COMMENT: It is still unclear what the field of competing parties will be during the next cycle of local and provincial elections in the North - and which candidates will dare stand against the EPDP. The UNP complained on June 15th of "armed groups" threatening its candidates in an attempt to prevent them from contesting the Jaffna Municipal Council and Vavuniya Urban Council elections in August. It comes as no surprise, however, that the end of regular combat between GSL forces and the LTTE would lead to a turf battle between the GSL's disparate ethnic Tamil allies. Post has been extremely candid in private discussions with the GSL leadership concerning our reservations about a significant role for Devananda in a new administration for the North. In our assessment, it is unlikely he has much legitimate popular support. We have brushed aside past suggestions that we fund

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the organizations he sponsors. We have told senior interlocutors (including Devananda himself) that the violence of its armed wing's tactics and the continuing criminal activities of EPDP cadres in Jaffna and Colombo would pose serious obstacles to U.S. cooperation with a provincial government led by him, or working in conjunction with an EPDP-led northern administration on reconstruction efforts. There are some recent signs that the GSL leadership, concerned about losing international assistance for the north, may be having second thoughts about installing Devananda as the head of a "quisling" Tamil regime.

MOORE